

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 191 (2015) 2267 – 2271

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCES 2014

# The Aphorism: Function and Discursive Strategy

Cosmin - Constantin Băiaș<sup>a\*</sup><sup>a</sup>*Universitatea Politehnica Timișoara, P-ta Victoriei No. 2, Timișoara, 300006, România*

---

## Abstract

Our work aims to study the valorization of the aphoristic style of expression. We are trying to answer the question whether the aphorism may be a heuristic tool. In order to construe the strength or value of an aphorism, we will resort to the problematological method. The problematological inference is the methodological tool through which the problematological discourse is being investigated as radical interrogativity of the interrogativity itself. In parallel, we are developing the theory on the functions of language. We assert that on top of the four functions of the language (expressive, communicative, descriptive and argumentative) comes the aphoristic function.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCES 2014

**Keywords:** Aphorism, aphoristic function, language functions, problematization;

---

## 1. Introduction

We aim to define the aphorism and the aphoristic style of communication. On the one hand, we will develop the theory of Karl Bühler and Karl Popper on the functions of language. We will bring arguments in favor of the thesis that a fifth function of the language, the aphoristic function, can be placed on top of the other four functions (expressive, communicative, descriptive and argumentative). The characteristics of the aphoristic function (memorability, concision and ambiguity) are directly linked to those of the aphorism and the aphoristic style of expression. On the other hand, in order to interpret the value of an aphorism we will resort to the problematological method. This method of investigation was suggested by the Belgian researcher Michel Meyer and is centered on the concept of "problem". In order to highlight the aphoristic force, we will avail ourselves of the concept of "problematological situation", theorized by the Romanian philosopher Constantin Sălăvăstru. This way, we will try

---

\* Cosmin - Constantin Băiaș Tel.: +2-222-222-2222

E-mail address: [cosminbaias@yahoo.com](mailto:cosminbaias@yahoo.com)

to answer the question whether the aphorism may be a heuristic tool. We thereby want to legitimize the aphoristic mode of expression in the pedagogical field too.

## 2. Definition of the Aphorism

From an etymological point of view, the aphorism comes from Greek, where "aphorismos" means to distinguish or define. The aphorism is part of a category of concepts with which it shares certain family traits, such as the axiom, the short dictum, the adage, the proverb, the cliché, the epigram. The aphorisms as short memorable expressions are found today in classic anthologies of quotations, such as Auden and Kronenbergers (1981), Gross (1983) and Strumpf and Auriel (1989), rather than in the initial places of their creation. In the introduction of *Webster's New World Best Book of Aphorism*, we can find an ample definition of the aphorism as "a concise statement of a principle, a short pointed sentence expressing a wise or a clever observation or a general truth" (Auriel and Strumpf, 1989). In common language, the aphorism is an original thought spoken or written by an author in a concise and memorable form. The fact that the aphorism is an original thought places it in antithesis with the doxa, the common opinion; hence the somewhat paradoxical, unique or unusual nature of the aphorisms; although it has a contextual nature, as it was thought for a specific historical period and geographic area, the aphorism passes on its richness to other generations. Unlike the aphorism, the cliché is a thought that has lost its original nature and has entered the anonymous daily circuit. The fact that it can be expressed both in writing and verbally is linked to its authorial nature. Unlike the cliché, the proverb or the adage, the aphorism is associated with the name of an author that created it either privately, in written, or spoken it in public. The aphorism has a touch of bravado, of the courage that stems mostly from its oral form. In this regard, Taleb (2010, pp. 108-109) provides an interesting etymological explanation: „Indeed, it had to be bravado, because the Arabic word for an improvised one-liner is «act of manliness», though such a notion of «manliness» is less gender-driven than it sounds and can be equally translated as «the skills of being human» (*virtue* has the same roots in Latin, *vir* „man”). As if those who could produce powerful thoughts in such a way were invested with talismanic power”. The concise form of the aphorism has to do with its minimalist nature. Through this process, one tries to express as much content as possible in the minimum form; this expresses its laconic mode or simplicity. However, the rhetoric and the meaning of the maxim differ from the aphorism: „Take it as a maxim and it is meant to guide our behavior; as an aphorism, and it invites reflection on the very basis of behavior” (Morson, 2004 p. 252). The maxim, the principle or the spiritual saying indicates how we should live, while the aphorism makes us meditate on what is essential. The memorable form of the aphorism is determined by the poetic nature and concision of the thought. The aphorism is similar to a jewel. Its concise form offers it the opportunity to be easily remembered. Due to its memorable nature, the aphorism is frequently quoted when the situation "requires it". The condensed definition is one of the forms chosen for persuasion by the media, but also by the propaganda.

J. Geary (2005, pp. 8-20) in his book *World in a Phrase: A Brief History of The Aphorism* identifies five laws of the aphorism: (1) It must Be Brief; (2) It must Be Definitive; (3) It must Be Personal; (4) It must Have a Twist; and (5) It must Be Philosophical. The aphorism as independent judgment has been used in various ways over time in religious texts (the book of Proverbs and the Ecclesiastes in the Bible, the Koran, Sutras etc.) for presentations (the writings of Heraclitus, Hippocrates and Epictetus), for satires (Martial, Aesop or Al-Maari), for moral thoughts (La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère or Chamfort) or for philosophical thoughts (Pascal, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Cioran or Wittgenstein). Unlike witticisms, frivolous and lacking in substance, valuable aphorisms are deep and spiritual thoughts that require time to be enjoyed, understood and assimilated. Taleb advises us (2010, p. 110): “You never have to explain an aphorism – like poetry, this is something that the reader needs to deal with by himself”. And the fact that each aphorism is a complete and independent unit in itself, absolutely distinct from the other, should change even our reading habits and make us read them in small, homeopathic doses.

## 3. Functions of the Language

The main function or feature of the language is undoubtedly the communication. In his theory of language, Karl Bühler (1934, pp. 25-28) was the first to bring the theory of three functions: the expressive function, the communicative function and the descriptive function. Afterwards, Karl Popper (2002, pp. 179-180) was the one who

strengthened and developed the concept of his mentor by adding a fourth function: the argumentative function.

*The expressive* or symptomatic function occurs when one communicates in order to express emotions and thoughts. For example, a plant that dries because it was not sufficiently watered expresses its negative status. Similarly, a grunting pig expresses an inner state. A child who screams and laughs also expresses an inner state. Thus, at this level of the language, the plants, the animals and the humans do not differ significantly.

*The communicative* or signaling function can be observed when the communication serves to stimulate or generate certain reactions in others. For example, animal cries are warning signs, protective signs or signals for mating. People use verbal language, linguistic calls and responses to trigger in others the urge to comply, react or interact. Although the communication mode of our species is more developed, there is still no essential difference between man and other living things at this stage.

*The descriptive* or representative function can be observed when the communication intentionally describes a state of affairs. An example can be the description of abstract things in mathematics or physics. Through this revolutionary function that differentiates us from the animals, we can describe events that took place in the past (such as the odyssey of Ulysses), in the present or the future (next summer vacation plans). Thus, we can formulate theories on reality through language. Only the descriptive function is specifically human.

Popper considers it necessary to add the *argumentative function*, also named critical or explicative function, as the highest level of the language. It consists of „presenting and comparing arguments or explanations associated to certain questions of problems” (Popper, 2002, p. 180). It can be noticed when one intentionally sustains (or counters) a certain point of view. Popper considers that the most valuable tradition of the argumentative function is the tradition and discipline of clear speech and thinking. The critical or argumentative attitude represents the essential element of scientific tradition. It should not be retained that one can formulate theories through language, but that the critical function has also the role to evaluate those theories. We consider that the four functions of communication are joined by a fifth one: *the aphoristic*, non-argumentative or mystic, function. We believe that on top of the argumentative function comes the non-argumentative function, which opposes the western rhetoric tradition based on confrontation, argumentation and persuasion. As Pascal said, “perfect clarity would profit the intellect but it damages the will” (Auden and Kronenbergers, 1981, p. 347). The non-argumentative rhetoric of the aphorism is rather an oriental one, in the spirit of Zen thinking, “because it is about what cannot be known, the rhetoric of the aphorism is often negative: the way that can be spoken of is not the true way” (Morson, 2004 p. 262). The merit of the aphoristic function of the language is that it makes us pay attention to the value of the word, since “language does not merely express thought; it is the mold that forms thinking” (Krystal, 2011, p 56). The aphoristic function of the language is linked to an invitational rhetoric, through which the other is invited, not “directed”, by means of arguments, to enter the world of the author. For the Viennese journalist Karl Kraus (1990, p. 67), the aphorism is either more or less than the truth conveyed by the conclusion of an argument: “An aphorism never coincides with the truth: it is either a half-truth or one-and-a-half truths”. The aphoristic function is not related to the truth, but to the meaning. The role of the aphoristic function is to show the limit of the language, to show that there is something else, something higher: “6.44 It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but that *it* exists” (Wittgenstein, 2001, p 158). If we use the Wittgensteinian distinction between saying and showing, then some things can be said (science assertions), and other things can only be shown. For Wittgenstein, the aphoristic function of the language is inherent to any description and explanation of reality. The Wittgensteinian aphoristic style comes to express the inherent ambiguity of language itself. The aphorism brings us closer to the mystery of existence, it can inspire us and make us ask ourselves what are the limits and the meaning of language: “7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 159). A brilliant aphorism is not intended to describe or explain reality, but to inspire human hearts and minds.

#### 4. Problematological Method

The problematological model for analysing the discursivity proposed by Michael Meyer (1986) serves both as theoretical approach and as methodological assumption, with the goal of using it as a rhetorical instrument for the interpretation of the aphoristic discourse. The assumption that dominates our approach: the form of the aphoristic discourse materializes in different ways of problematizing the content. The efficient aphoristic strategy is the one

that succeeds in providing full complementarity between content and form. The problematology is centered on the concept of problem and is based on polemic interrogativity, the one that triggers polemical reactions. The central theme of the problematological approach is the questioning, the interrogation, the temptation. For Meyer (1986, p. 14), "questioning is the principle of thought itself, the philosophical principle par excellence" and the philosophical approach is "a radical questioning with questioning itself as main theme". The problematological model is opposed to the propositional model of the resolution. The propositional model of thought believes that the answer to a question, as solution to the problem, takes the form of the sentence whose true or false nature must be determined. On the contrary, the problematological model never seeks to close the issue by stating its verity or falsity, and facilitates instead the problematization. The problematological model is the one that refuses to suppress or eliminate the problem, aiming to amplify or diversify it. The problematological difference consists of assuming a radical questioning through the conceptual couple question – answer, considered the origin of human thinking and dialogical relationship. The Romanian philosopher Constantin Sălăvăștru (2001, p. 87) has broadened the concept of problematological difference by framing it in what he called a problematological situation, namely "a particular instantiation of the categorial couple *question (question)* – *answer (réponse)* according to two criteria: the distinction criterion (of differentiation) between question and answer, and the *criterion of the problematicity* induced or not by the categorial couple question – answer". Based on these distinctions, we believe that the aphoristic approach meets the two criteria: the question and the answer can be distinguished and the level of problematization is high. The aphorisms are problematological answers that do not suppress and solve the problem triggered by the question, but open it in a space of meaning, relationship and dialogue. The aphorism is not cumulative, but constructive. Aphoristic thinking ignores the old solutions of a problem, retaining the new alternative answers to the fundamental questions. In this respect, the aphoristic discourse opposes to the scientific, cumulative discourse, which offers apocryphal answers and wants to eliminate the problematic. We can say that the discursive strategy can be reduced to the dominant tone of the discourse that recovers the author's intentions. The most used strategies include: dialogic strategy, demonstrative strategy, explicative strategy, descriptive strategy. As specific approach, the aphoristic strategy differs from other discursive strategies. The aphoristic type of discourse is not, as dominant tone, an argumentation (as in the case of dialogical strategy), nor a description (it is not deductive) and there is no explanation (there's no link between cause and effect). The aphoristic strategy manages to keep the problematological nature of a discourse at a high level, as it proposes alternatives. While other rhetorical strategies claim to solve problems, the aphoristic strategy rather deepens the mystery: "Dicta claim to have solved a problem that aphorisms would treat as unsolvable" (Morson, 2004, p. 256). Dicta are the ones suppressing the cracks, while the aphorism increases them. The fragmentary form of the aphorism offers a problematological opening, because it has a paradoxical nature either in its form, in its content, in its rhetoric or in its totalizing and universalizing intention. Not everything can be explained and argued rationally: "Aphorism can sometimes suggest the nature of the riddle, but they won't solve it – another reason that readers who enjoy, and writers who indulge in, aphorisms gravitate toward irony" (Krystal, 2011, p. 60). The openings of an aphoristic strategy are created by the rejection of a thinking system, of the ambition to enclose the existential whole in the most concise expression. The paradoxical situations generated by the aphorisms are determined by its contradictory form, by the unusual connections between ideas, concepts and situations. The power of suggestion or the mystical function of language is the one that confers multiple and varied interpretations to the aphoristic thought. We believe that exploiting this discursive resource in disciplines such as philosophy or rhetoric produces a result with beneficial effects on the educational act. The aphoristic method of expression is not for anyone, unlike the universal audience of the maxim or the scientific dictum: "The audience of dictum is universal, of the aphorism highly limited" (Morson, 2004 p. 261).

## 5. Conclusions

The aphorisms distinguish themselves from other types of expression by their lapidary and memorable form. The content of aphorisms is a personal and original one. The aphoristic function of language is related to an invitational rhetoric through which the other is invited to enter the world of the author, to see and understand things as they are seen and understood by him, without resorting to descriptions or arguments. Therefore, the aphorism is not really linked to the truth; it is not intended to describe or explain reality, but to inspire people.

The aphoristic strategy offers problematological answers that do not close and solve the problem triggered by the question, but opens it in a space of meaning, dialogue and interpretation. The aphoristic strategy is not cumulative, as is the strategy of sciences; the aphoristic strategy, based on the problematization method, is constructive, since it provides new possibilities of interpretation through the alternatives it finds. A new meaning can arise if we follow the advice of the famous Polish aphorism writer Stanislaw Lec: "Think before you think!" (Gross, 1983, p. 262). In addition, we believe that aphorism as discursive strategy is a heuristic tool for disciplines such as philosophy or rhetoric in their attempt to discover new interpretations and new ways of expression.

## References

- Auden W. H. și Kronenberger, eds. (1981). *The Viking Book of Aphorisms: A Personal Selection*. No place: Dorset.
- Auriel, D. și Strupf, M., eds. (1989). *Webster's New World Best Book of Aphorism*. New York: Webster's New World.
- Bühler, K. (1934). *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache*. Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer.
- Gross, J., ed. (1983). *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geary, J. (2005). *World in a Phrase: A Brief History of The Aphorism*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Kraus, K. (1990). *Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths*, ed. H. Zohn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Krystal, A. (2011). *Except When I Write*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morson, G. S. (2004). "Aphoristic Style: The Rhetoric of the Aphorism". În W. Jost și W. Olmsted, eds., *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (pp. 248-265). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Meyer, M. (1986). *De la problématique: philosophie, science et langage*. Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga.
- Popper, K. (2002). „Spre o teorie rațională a tradiției”. În K. Popper *Conjecturi și infirmări: creșterea cunoașterii științifice* (pp. 163-181). București: Trei.
- Sălăvăstru, C. (2001). *Critica raționalității discursive*. Iași: Polirom.
- Taleb, N. N. (2010). *The Bed of Procrustes: Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms*. Random House.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. București: Humanitas.